

Tasting Chocolate

by Nor of Kiamo Ko

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Summary: Seaweed and Penny got together at the end of the musical, but can they make it through the social challenges of their relationship? Hairspray, Broadway fandom. SeaweedPenny, TracyLink. Please R&R. UPDATE: Over 30000 hits! Complete 7.4.07

1. The Nicest Kids in Town

****Tasting Chocolate****

****By Nor of Kiamo Ko****

"_In my ivory tower**_"**

Life was just a Hostess snack**"**

But now I've tasted chocolate**"**

And I'm never going back!"**"**

-**Penny Pingleton, "Without Love"*****

****A/N: I love **_**Hairspray**_**, so I decided to write a fanfic about itâ€¦ here goes! Keep in mind that this is my first fanficâ€¦ I need all the help I can get. Please R&R if you have the time.
****i.Š****

****Disclaimer: Do I look like Mark O'Donnell, Thomas Meehan, Mark Shaiman, or Scott Wittman to you? (Be careful how you answer thatâ€¦)****

Chapter One:

The "Nicest" Kids in Town

"What's wrong, baby?" Seaweed asked, holding his arm a little tighter around Penny's shoulders.

"Nothing," she sighed. "It's justâ€¦ why is everyone staring at us?"

The couple was on one of their walks down South Avenue, after Seaweed was through with work (if you could call dancing like there was no tomorrow on national television work). As always, Seaweed's arm was around Penny's shoulders; and, as always, Seaweed was silently shocked by the number of people who were staring unabashedly at them.

"'Cause you're so beautiful, my princess," he said, faking a cheerful tone, as he ceremoniously kissed the top of her head.

"Oh, Seaweed," Penny murmured dreamily. Silently she thought, He's lyingâ€¦ but at least it's a sweet lie.

Just as she had suspected, Seaweed knew exactly why people were staring, and he was now giving a few people who were gawping at his display of affection a look that he hoped said, Yes, we're together. Me and her. Now get over it. The busybodies clamped their mouths shut and went on their way. Feeling satisfied, he nodded and turned to Penny. "Momma wanted you over for dinner tomorrow night. That cool?"

Penny smiled. "I'd like that." He gave her a quick squeeze and they kept walking.

* * *

>"It's bad enough that we have to dance with themâ€¦do we have to date them, too?" A chorus of laughter came from the corner where Amber, Brenda, and Tammy were sitting in History class the next day. Amber shot Penny a contemptuous look from across the room and started laughing even louder. Penny squeezed her pencil so tightly that she wondered why it didn't break.

Tracy looked at Penny, sighed, and one by one started to uncurl her friend's fingers from around the pencil. "Don't strangle it," she started to joke. She immediately turned solemn when Penny shot her a reproachful look. "Sorry. Penny, it's okay. They're not worth it."

Penny sighed. "I know, but it makes me so mad. There's nothing wrong with Seaweed, and I love him. Why should anything else matter?"

Tracy glared at the gaggle of girls in the corner, then stood up and stalked over to them. They stopped laughing the moment Tracy opened her mouth.

"Hello girls," she said, feigning politeness. "I haven't spoken to you in a while." She turned to Tammy. "I see you're still padding." She got down close to her and stage-whispered, "Next time, try to make them a little more even." Tammy turned pink and immediately got up to go to the bathroom.

Then she smiled at Brenda. "How's the baby? Don't worry, I'm sure you'll figure out who her daddy is soon enough." The young mother turned bright redâ€¦it was common knowledge that the only reason

Tracy had made it onto The Corny Collins Show was that Brenda had taken a nine-month "leave of absence".

Finally, Tracy shot a toothy, entirely false grin at Amber. "And don't worry, hon, there's no shame in being single." Amber's face turned a deep shade of purple. Link, her ex-boyfriend, had left her for Tracy a couple of months ago.

"Nice talking to you all again!" Tracy waved and walked back to her seat. She smiled wickedly at Penny, who giggled.

"That was horrible, Tracy."

"I know, but at least now they won't bother you quite as much." Tracy gave Penny a quick hug. "This is why you keep me around, remember?"

Penny smiled weakly and nodded. She was thankful to have Tracy around to temporarily staunch the flow of torment those girls sent at her, but really she just wished they would stop and realize that skin color really didn't matter. At least she had dinner with Seaweed, Ms. Maybelle, and L'il Inez to look forward to that night.

* * *

>Later that afternoon, Penny looked on as Seaweed did the Mashed Potato with Brenda. She never really got jealous when she watched him dance with other girls on set; she knew he loved dancing, not dancing with them.<p><p>

"Roll call!"

"I'm
Amber!"

"Brad!"

"Tammy!"

"Stooie!"

"Fender!"

"Brenda!"

"Duane!"

"Sketch!"

"Shelley!"

"Louann!"

"Tracy!"

"Link!"

"And I'mâ€| Seaweed!" All the girls screamed, and he winked at Penny, as though he were saying, "Ain't this funny?"

Penny giggled. Actually, she thought the screaming girls wereâ€¦ well, a scream, especially when they ended up screeching for one of the other girls.

Corny finished the theme song, and introduced the next dance: The Hottie, led by Seaweed and Tracy. Penny applauded and whooped supportively as they went out to the dance floor, followed by all the other dancers.

Finally, Corny closed the show with an ad for Ultra Clutch hairspray, and Seaweed ran off set, scooped Penny up in his arms, and kissed her. She smiled and kissed him back; she loved it when he did sweet things like that. He always tasted a little bit like coffee (she couldn't for the life of her figure out why), and she always felt so safe when they were together that way.

After what seemed like an eternal kiss, he put her down and offered her his arm. "May I have the honor of escorting you to dinner?"

She stepped closer to him and let him put his arm around her shoulders. "Of course you may." She blatantly ignored the glares from the other girls, telling herself they were just jealousâ€¦

2. If They Try to Stop Us, Seaweed

****A/N: Yay! I've actually got a couple reviews! Thanks so much to beccgallanter and Penguinperson for the feedback.****

Chapter Two:

If They Try to Stop Us, Seaweed

"Momma!" Seaweed shouted. "Momma, we're home!" He beckoned to Penny, indicating that they should go into the house. Penny stepped over the threshold and let the kitchen smells envelop her in a fog.

Seaweed inhaled deeply and smiled. "Mmm, fried chicken! Momma, you shouldn't have!"

"Of course I should!" Motormouth Maybelle (or just Ms. Maybelle to Seaweed's friends), co-host of the Corny Collins Show, boomed from the kitchen. "If my baby boy's baby is gonna come to dinner, I want to give her the best!"

Both the baby boy and his baby blushed a little at that one. They smiled awkwardly at each other until the sound of running footsteps caught their attention.

"PENNY!" Inez threw herself at Penny and gave her a bear hug. It had taken some time for the young girl to get used to Penny, but after a while she began to think of the older girl as the sister she never had.

Penny hugged Inez back. "Aww, hi, L'il Inez."

Seaweed suddenly pried the two girls apart. Pretending to be completely serious, he turned to Penny and said, "Y'know, I'm not sure I like sharing you," giving her a long kiss.

"Ew!" Inez hurried into the kitchen to help her mother. The couple separated themselves and smiled knowingly.

"You know, eventually she's going to grow up and we're not going to be able to do that anymore," Penny reminded him.

"I know," Seaweed whispered with a mischievous smile, "but for now, it's the only way to get us some alone time." He laughed and sat down on the sofa, pulling Penny down with him. She laughed softly (having your boyfriend's mother hear you playing around on their couch was not exactly romantic) and let herself be wrapped up in his arms. She laid her head on his chest and inhaled his scent deeply. It was infinitely better than fried chicken.

Just as Seaweed was tilting Penny's head up for a kiss, Ms. Maybelle bellowed from the kitchen. "DINNER!"

Seaweed shook his head and stood up, chivalrously helping Penny up from the sofa. "So close," he murmured into her hair as they entered the kitchen.

* * *

>"More chicken, Penny?" Ms. Maybelle asked.<p><p>

"Yes, please." Even though she was full to bursting, Penny knew an "if-you-say-no-I-am-going-to-make-you-feel-very-guilty" tone when she heard one. She took another wing (the smallest part she could find) and bit into it as conversation resumed.

"This man," Ms. Maybelle continued, "is amazing! He's been talking to President Kennedyâ€"one of the best men, black or white, this world has ever heard ofâ€"for over a year now; he's trying to get a black man on the Supreme Court, and the president is listening! He's been leading marches and making speeches all over the place. Your Aunt Minnie down in Alabama goes to that Baptist church he preaches at, and she swore every one of his sermons has moved everybody in the sanctuary to tears. I tell you, this Martin Luther King sounds like a mighty fine man."

Seaweed nodded a familiar light in his eyes. Inez looked enchanted; there was simply no other word for it. Penny grinned. "Yes, ma'am, he does."

Ms. Maybelle was about to say something else about the amazing Dr. King when a thoughtful expression came over her face and she looked up at the clock. "Penny, you'd better be getting home. It's late!"

Penny glanced at the clock and nodded. "I should." She stood up from the table and said, "Thank you for dinner. It was delicious!"

Ms. Maybelle beamed. "Thank you, honey." She turned to Seaweed and glared sharply. "Aren't you gonna walk your baby home? It's dark out!"

Seaweed stood up, too. Penny hugged Inez goodbye, waved to Ms. Maybelle, and left with Seaweed's arm around her shoulders.

* * *

>Penny's house was, truthfully, not that far from Seaweed's; they were standing on her corner in five minutes. Penny could have very easily made the trip herself, but Ms. Maybelle had sensed that she and Seaweed wanted to be alone.<p><p>

And they did. The couple spent the whole trip cuddling and canoodling and whispering things to each other that Penny would have been mortified by if they were overheard.

They arrived in front of Penny's house as the first evening star was peeking out. Penny closed her eyes and put her arms around Seaweed's neck. "Have I ever mentioned how much I love eating with your family?"

He chuckled and slipped his arms around her waist. "Only about a thousand times."

"Really! It's so much better than eating celery sticks with my mother while she yammers on about what's wrong with the world today."

"Mmm," he said, paying more attention to holding her than to what she was saying. Penny sighed and gave up, leaning further into him and placing her head on his shoulder. She kept her eyes closed for a few moments, then opened them so she could step away and gasped. She ducked out of Seaweed's embrace and put her hands to her mouth, eyes wide.

"What?" Seaweed asked, shocked and concerned at how she had backed away from him. Penny shook her head rapidly and pointed behind him at her house. He turned around and

And saw the horrible message spray-painted in black on her garage door.

His eyes hardened. He gently but firmly grabbed Penny by the arm and turned her around. "Come on," he ordered. "We're going back to my place."

3. The Paradise We're Dreaming Of

A/N: Oh my chicken and waffles, this story has over 100 hits!! Thank you so much, everybody, especially AdamPascalFareeaak89, Penguinperson, and beccgallanter. Y'all are the best!

Chapter Three:

The Paradise We're Dreaming Of

Seaweed burst into the house, still leading Penny by the arm. "Momma!"

Ms. Maybelle stomped out of the kitchen wearing latex gloves and an apron, with Inez trailing along behind. "Boy, why are you comin' in here yellin' like?" She saw Penny. "Oh, Penny! Why aren't you home?"

"A bunch of taggers thought they were being funny," Seaweed explained

darkly. "They wrote a message on her house."

Ms. Maybelle frowned and turned to Penny. "What did it say?"

Penny clamped her mouth shut and shook her head. She couldn't say it, not in front of this woman she respected so much; not in front of sweet little Inez. Seaweed patted her shoulder absently and whispered the message in his mother's ear. Her face hardened, and she bit her lip, unable to rave about it in front of her daughter.

As if she were able to read minds, Inez suddenly piped up. "What? What did it say?"

Seaweed sighed and turned to his sister. "Basically, someone wants Penny toâ€¦ they don't like it that we're together."

"Oh." Inez paused for a moment. "Then why couldn't you say it out loud?"

Seaweed took a deep breath. "They justâ€¦ they used some words that shouldn't be said out loud." Inez darkened. Penny wasn't surprised; she'd noticed that Seaweed sometimes underestimated what his younger sister knew.

Finally Penny was able to speak. "Could I stay here tonight? I mean, if it isn't too much troubleâ€¦"

Ms. Maybelle softened. "Of course you can, but aren't you worried about your momma?"

Penny shook her head. "My grandmother died of old age a month ago. I don't have to keep Mother away from the kitchen knives anymore." Ms. Maybelle raised her eyebrows and sent a questioning look at Seaweed.

He shrugged. "I told you her mama was loony."

Ms. Maybelle nodded gravely and continued her conversation with Penny. "You can stay in the guest room, Penny," Ms. Maybelle said, leading the blonde down a side hallway.

Seaweed looked after them and sighed. He would have to do something about this.

* * *

>The next morning, Penny was very much aware of the fact that she was awake, but she didn't want to open her eyes yet. She stretched; first her arms, then her back, then her legsâ€¦but her legs wouldn't move. She tried stretching them a few more times, failed, and sat up in alarm.<p><p>

She smiled and relaxed. Her legs wouldn't move because Seaweed was sitting on them.

"Good morning," she said, leaning over to kiss him on the cheek.

"Morning," he said flatly. Penny looked concerned. Seaweed took one of her hands in both of his and stroked it absently with his

thumbs.

"Penny," he said, more softly than she had ever heard him, "you don't have to go through with this if you don't want to."

"Go through what?"

"You knowâ€¦ us."

Penny froze. Her mind raced and her eyes filled with tears. "What? Seaweedâ€¦ you don't love me anymore?"

"No, no, never!" He grabbed her in a strong embrace, burying his face in her hair. "I love you. I will never, never stop, baby, don't you know that?"

In spite of how hard she was trying to keep them inside of her, she couldn't stop a few tears from slipping out of her eyes.

He leaned back and looked at her for a moment, taking her face gently in his hands. "I love you, Penny, and I don't want anyone to hurt you. I've heard thingsâ€¦ awful thingsâ€¦ about people in this same situation. Penny, you read the message. They want you to leave townâ€¦ and, more importantly, they want you to leave me. What happens if you don't?" He brushed a few tears off her cheek. "I don't want you to get hurt."

She closed her eyes and tried to keep from sobbing. They stayed like that for a while, her face in his hands, him sitting on her feet. Finally she spoke. It came out soft, almost inaudible. "Seaweed?"

He came closer; wrapping his arms around her waist in fear of what was coming next. "Yes?"

She slipped her arms around his neck and put her head on his shoulder. "Nothing could ever hurt me more than leaving you."

****A/N: Sorry this was so short, I'll make up for it in the next chapter, I promise!****

4. The Price We Have to Pay

****A/N: Guess which author is going to be the subject of many, many flame reviews this week...****

Chapter Four:

The Road We Must Travel

On Monday, Penny was actually taking notes in Physics for once when a note, folded into a tiny square, landed at her feet. She looked up to make sure the stodgy old teacher wasn't looking, then stealthily dropped her pencil and grabbed it and the note off the floor in one scoop. She checked once more to see that the teacher wasn't paying attention and, upon satisfaction, quickly unfolded the note under her desk.

Get any interesting notes lately?

A

_P.S. Please accept my _sincerest_ condolences regarding your recent breakup._

Penny was speechless. Amber (it had to be her; she was the only "A" in the class) seemed so sure that she and Seaweed had broken up, which was shocking for two reasons: For one thing, Penny hadn't mentioned her talk with Seaweed to anyone except Tracy, and that had been over the phone. For another, she and Seaweed were _still together_.

She pulled the note out and read it again, muttering under her breath. "Interesting notesâ€¦" Suddenly something clicked. Her head snapped up and she glowered at Amber, who smiled and wiggled her fingers.

Tracy glanced over at Penny and noticed the animosity in her friend's stare. "What's wrong?" she asked, suddenly very worried.

None of them could have expected what happened next.

Penny wasn't even sure what was happening until she found herself on the ground, on top of Amber, interrogating her loudly. She punctuated each question with a forceful blow.

"How did you know about the message on my house?" Slap. "Did you write it?" Scratch. "Well, if you did, too bad for you, because we're in love and I will NEVER leave him until the day I die!"
PUNCH!

Amber, by now, was looking sufficiently scared, and managed to answer the questions between strikes. "I didn'tâ€¦ write itâ€¦ Heard about it laterâ€¦ from a couple of senior boysâ€¦"

Before she could offer a more thorough explanation, the teacher had Penny by the ear. (Despite the seriousness of the situation, Penny couldn't help thinking that she had no idea the old man could run so fast.) "Miss Pingleton!" he bellowed. "This is the sort of behavior I would expect from your friend, Miss Turnblad," he said, gesturing towards Tracy, "but not from _you. _This is a firstâ€¦and hopefully lastâ€¦offense, so I'll let you off easy: detention after school for a week!"

"Yes sir," Penny said, sneaking a hostile glare at Amber when he wasn't looking.

* * *

>Later that afternoon, Penny and Tracy walked into detention. They were greeted warmly by the other "regulars," including Seaweed.
<p>"You in for the usual, Trace?" he asked.<p>

Tracy sighed. "Yes. It's just not fair! They gave me a WEEK of detention for the latest fashion in hair!"

Penny shook her head. Tracy had been elevated to martyrdom for the number of detentions she had received because of the height of her coif. The principal claimed it was a distraction to the learning environment, but Tracy was adamant about staying in touch with the

latest trends" which was why she was stuck in detention nearly every day.

Seaweed turned to Penny and grinned. "How 'bout you, Penny?"

Penny smiled weakly. Seaweed asked her this question every afternoon. It was a big joke" the only reason she ever went to detention was to give Tracy moral support. Her answer usually consisted of a giggle and a kiss; she decided that might be the best approach for this time, too.

"I got in a fight with Amber von Tussle," she said blithely, leaning in for her kiss.

Seaweed chuckled and leaned forward, kissing her lightly on the lips and placing his hands on her waist, as though they were eighth graders at a junior high school dance. The other "regulars" groaned, just like they did every day. Penny rejoiced inwardly; he'd fallen for it!

Then he pulled away and looked at her strangely. "You _what?_"

She winced. Busted. "I" sort of beat up Amber von Tussle in Physics." This announcement was met with much cheering from those who had witnessed the fight.

Seaweed raised his eyebrows, more from concern than shock. "Penny, this isn't like you. What happened?"

"She" she basically told me she knew about the spray paint on my house," Penny explained, hanging her head. "I thought she'd done it, and I went sort of nuts."

Seaweed sighed, picked her up, and sat her down on a desk. "Penny, you remember that Dr. King my momma was talking about, right?" She nodded. "Well, one of the things that makes him so great is that he preaches against violence. He says that it just breeds more violence. 'Hate begets hate" wars beget wars"' He stared off into space for a moment, and Penny looked at him quizzically. He snapped out of his reverie and quickly said, "Basically, don't fight with the people who disagree with you" at least, not physically."

Penny chewed on her bottom lip. "All right" I'm sorry; I guess I just lost my mind."

He smiled. "OK. But I don't wanna hear about it again, or I'll tell my momma _and _yours."

She chuckled and gave him a quick peck on the cheek as he swung her down off the desk, to the divided entertainment and disgust of the other "regulars".

* * *

>Detention was finally over at four o'clock, and Tracy, Penny, and Seaweed had to rush to get to the Corny Collins studio in time. A person standing on the other side of the street might have laughed at them: Penny's pigtails bouncing along as she ran, poor Tracy sprinting to keep up (and not doing a very good job of it), and Seaweed running between them, yelling, "Can't you girls run any

faster?!"

They were concentrating so hard on not being late, in fact, that they didn't notice the rusted Buick creeping down the road behind them.

They didn't notice the two vengeful-looking senior boys in the front seat.

They didn't notice the car speed up as it came up behind them. They didn't see it run off the road.

They weren't even aware of the car until Penny hit the ground and it roared away in the other direction.

****A/N: CLIFFHANGER! All right, I know this looks bad... but don't take me off your alert lists just yet! There's more in store for Penny, I promise...****

5. The Road We Must Travel

****A/N: Thank you for your concern about Penny (and all of the wonderful, always-welcome reviews), but all I have to say is: Oh, ye of little faith.****

****Disclaimer: I do not own any direct quotes from the musical. (See if you can find it for yourselfâ€¦)****

Chapter Five:

The Road We Must Travel

****SEAWEEED'S POV****

Seaweed stood silently in front of the door to Penny's room at Bethesda Memorial Hospital. He took a deep breath, opened the door, and went in.

The little room was sparsely furnished, there was a chair, and a bed, and a little table with a telephone on it. The wallpaper was cream, andâ€¦ well, it didn't exactly look like the first thing you'd want to see after waking up from a three-day sleep.

He sat down in the chair beside her bed and watched herâ€¦ well, the best way to describe it was sleep. The doctor said she had passed out when her head hit the ground, and had suffered a bad concussion. She looked pale and thin, but strangely peaceful. He touched her face; was it warmer than it had been yesterday, or was that his imagination?

"Hey, Penny," he whispered. "How've you been?" He didn't expect her to answer, and she didn't. "Your momma's carrying on something fearful," he continued. "My momma wants to carry on a little, I can tell, but she's too busy telling your momma to stop carrying on. She's staying with us, you know. She said your house was just getting to be too empty." He stopped. Could she hear him? Maybe he was upsetting her.

He took her hand and felt for a pulse, but he couldn't tell whether

there was really blood moving through her veins or not. He dropped her hand. Hesitantly, he knelt down beside her and put his ear over her heart.

He sighed with relief. Her heartbeat had gone from an almost inaudible _Thumpâ€|Thumpâ€|Thump_ to a slightly louder _Thump. Thump. Thump _to today's _Thump, thump, thump _over the past few days. He stayed there, listening to her heartbeat, the sweetest beat he had ever heard in all his years of dancingâ€|

****PENNY'S POV****

Everything was dark. There was a strong smell of peroxide and bleach mixed withâ€| coffee. Coffee and cologne.

Seaweed.

Wherever she was, Seaweed was with her, and that made everything OK.

She was suddenly aware of a weight on her chest, just over her heart. There was a warm wetness there, too; was she bleeding? She opened her eyes and lifted her head slightly so she could see her chest.

She didn't know whether to laugh or cry when she saw Seaweed sitting on the floor, his ear to her breast, crying with relief because he could hear her heartbeat; so she did both.

"_Seaweed_," she whispered hoarsely when she could speak again.

She would never forget the look of pure joy on his face when he wordlessly embraced her.

She hugged him back, and then propped herself up on her elbows and kissed him. He kissed her back, burying his hands in her hair first, and then slowly moving them down her back. He rubbed her back gently, reluctantly backing away after a nurse walked in on them. Still, that didn't stop him from sitting on the bed and holding her hand.

"Sorry." Seaweed smiled sheepishly. "I just thought I might not get to do that ever again."

"It's perfectly fine," Penny said, grinning impishly at him. "I guess they know I'm awake now."

Seaweed suddenly snapped into Dad Mode. "Yeahâ€| Um, how are you feeling?"

"Like I got run over by a truck."

"Actually, it was a Buickâ€|"

"What was that?"

"Nothing. I mean, are you hungry or anything? 'Cause there's a cafeteria right downstairs and I could get you something."

"Seaweed, I'm hungry, but I can very well get something to eat by myself." Penny got up, got dizzy, and immediately fell right back

onto the bed. "Orà you could go get it if you want."

He grinned and kissed her on the cheek. "Whatever you say, my princess," he said, heading out of the room.

Once he was gone, she sighed. "He's so nurturing," she murmured.

* * *

><p>SEAWEED'S POV

Seaweed was back within a few minutes, carrying a tray full of food. He tried not to look at itàhe'd attempted to earlier, but couldn't do it without grimacing. He smiled at Penny, while trying not to look at the food or inhale the scent of itàit sure didn't _smell_ like it was good for you. "Room service," he said lightly as he placed the tray on her lap. He was faintly worried that she might not eat it; she had to eat _something_ to keep up her energy, and this was the cheapest food within a five-mile radius.

He hadn't counted on the fact that Penny hadn't eaten in three days, she was ravenously hungry, and she probably wouldn't have time to examine the food in front of her before shoveling it in her mouth. The tray was empty in less than fifteen minutes.

Penny blushed. "Wowà I felt like I hadn't eaten in three daysà sorry to act like such a pig."

Seaweed winced. This was going to be the difficult part. "You haven't. Eaten in three days, I mean."

Penny's mouth dropped. "I _haven't_? But it's late afternoon! I've only been out for a few hours!"

Seaweed closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "Penny," he said softly, "what's the last day you remember?"

Penny looked puzzled. "Monday."

"Today's Thursday."

Her eyes widened in shock. "Oh," she murmured. They sat in silence for a few minutes. "Soà what happened on Monday?" she asked. "It's all sort of a blurà something hit me from behind, and I fell, and then everything just went dark."

Seaweed explained. "A car ran off the road and hit you. Weà Tracy and Ià had to call an ambulance, and we went with you to the hospital. They got you settled in and told us you'd have to stay here for awhile... probably a few days after you woke up." He didn't mention that the doctor had said, "_if _she wakes up". No need to upset her further.

Penny nodded thoughtfully, and Seaweed took yet another deep breath. 'God, I hope I got some acting skills from Momma,' he thought as he contemplated his next words.

"You know what?" he said, suddenly looking more animated. "After you get out of hereà probably on Monday or Tuesday at the latestà I wanna take you somewhere."

Penny brightened. "Oh, Seaweed, that's so sweet of you! There's a little French restaurant opening up downtown, but we could just as easily go to the chicken-and-waffles place, whatever you want."

"Actually, I was thinking _outside _of townâ€¦ like D.C.!"

Penny smiled. "Seaweed, that's so nice of you, but I've been to Washington four times at least. You don't have to spend all that money for little me."

Seaweed grinned. "What if I told you Dr. King was speaking there, and I've invited Tracy and Link to go with us, and Momma was so excited when she heard you were coming that she got us a three-bedroom suite at the State Inn?"

Penny's mouth dropped. "Oh my goshâ€¦ _Seaweed_â€¦ youâ€¦ Iâ€¦ Oh, _all right_, of _course _I'll come!"

"Great!" Seaweed hugged her, inwardly heaving a sigh of relief. The real reason he wanted to take Penny to Washingtonâ€¦and the others agreed with thisâ€¦was that he couldn't risk having her attacked again. He couldn't let there be a next time.

They might succeed if there was a next time.

****A/N: Wow! I think this might be the longest chapter! Sorry to flim-flam with the POV, it just made more sense that way.****

6. Every Day's Like an Open Door

****Disclaimer: The State Inn is NOT (repeat, NOT) the State Plaza Hotel. It is a product of my own imagination. Everything else is, well, not mine.****

Chapter Six:

Every Day's Like an Open Door

"Penny," she heard him murmur. "Penny, wake up. We're here."

She fluttered her eyelids open drowsily. "Unnh?"

"This is our stop!" Tracy piped up. "C'mon!"

Penny suddenly remembered where she was. She hopped out of her seat, grabbed her suitcase, and hurried off the train after Seaweed.

It was two days after Penny's accident, and the doctor had released her a day before they'd expected. She had recovered completely, and the early release gave her time to pack and let her mother fawn all over her. (The poor woman had even tried to cook, with disastrous results. Penny had eaten it to please her, but the gunk had tasted worse than the hospital food.)

Once the subway had sped away, Ms. Maybelle did a very brief head count. "Do we have all four?" she asked, even though she had already counted.

"Yes," the four antsy teenagers chorused with a hint of impatience. Penny's mind was racing with the possibilities of a week in D.C. _Imagine getting to hear Dr. King speak! _she thought excitedly.

Ms. Maybelle grinned. "All right, then, what are we waiting for?"

Giggling and shouting as only teenagers could, the foursome hurried off the platform to the streets of Washington, D.C. Ms. Maybelle flagged down a cab, and (after much squeezing, resulting in Ms. Maybelle sitting in the front passenger seat) they were off to the State Inn.

* * *

>The door slowly opened, and the little group of travelers stepped into their suite.<p><p>

Penny gasped. "It's beautiful!"

It was. There was red plush carpet on the floors; a balcony with a view of the Washington Monument; a very comfortable-looking sofa with a view of a small television; a kitchenette, complete with a refrigerator and small stove; a table-and-chair set, and four doors leading to other rooms in the suite.

"Now, the people I talked to on the phone told me this suite had three bedrooms: two with two beds, and one with one bed. That one's mine," Ms. Maybelle instructed. "Y'all can choose who gets which room among yourselves, but the girls and boys must stay apart from each other." She smiled. "I believe in integration, but I have to draw the line somewhere." Penny looked at Seaweed and giggled sheepishly before going with Tracy to claim their room.

* * *

>"Isn't it gorgeous?" Tracy sighed as she gazed out over the Reflecting Pool.<p><p>

"Yeah," Penny answered absently as she continued to unpack her suitcase. She came to the last item and froze. She glanced at Tracy, who was totally entranced by the monument, and quickly shoved the shirt under her pillow.

Suddenly Tracy looked puzzled. She turned to Penny and asked, "Did you just stuff something under your pillow?"

Penny's heart raced. "No, no, I didn't put anything under my pillow, what would make you think that?" She laughed nervously.

Tracy's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Yes you did. What is it?"

Penny bit her lip, sighed, and very slowly removed the white cotton T-shirt from under her pillow. "It's just a shirt."

Tracy raised her eyebrows. "It looks a little big for you."

This was one of those moments when Penny wished she weren't so skinny. "It's a nightshirt." Well, it was certainly a shirt she

used at nightâ€|

Tracy got up from the window seat and sat on her bed, across from Penny. "So why is it under your pillow?"

Penny sighed. Tracy was impossible to lie to. "It's Seaweed's. I kind of took it from his bedroom a few weeks ago. It's kinda stupid, but I fall asleep hugging it every night." She blushed. "It smells like himâ€|"

Tracy smiled. "Awww! That's not stupid, Penny. It's sweet." They sat there for a minute, and suddenly Tracy perked up.

"Hey, do you know what you should do?"

"What?"

You should tell Seaweed to meet you in there some night," she pointed towards the main room connecting all three bedrooms, "and cozy up on the couch a little bit, maybe evenâ€""

Penny squealed. "Tracy! With his mother in the next room? Iâ€| I couldn't!"

Tracy held her palms up in mock surrender. "Just a suggestion."

****SEAWEED'S POV****

Seaweed was so engrossed in the hustle and bustle below his window that he barely noticed Link poking around in his thingsâ€| until he heard a sigh and an "Oh, boy," from behind him. He turned around and saw Link holding a handkerchief by a corner.

"What's with the fancy Kleenex?" Link asked suspiciously.

"Ahâ€| it's just one of Momma's hankies. How did that get in there?"

Link sniffed it. "It smells like Penny's perfume."

Seaweed panicked. He tried stalling. "How would you know what Penny's perfume smells like?"

"She's been practically bathing in the stuff since you got it for her." Link stared hard at Seaweed until, finally, he cracked.

"I, ah, might have put some of that stuff on the hankie." He sighed. "I don't know, lately I've just been going nuts. Like a few weeks ago, one of my favorite old shirts just disappeared. I looked everywhere and just couldn't find the old thing. Penny had just left, so I guess I was a little out of it." He shrugged. "I'll find it eventually."

Link shook his head. "Man, you've got it bad."

Seaweed sighed. "Yeah, I know."

Link looked mischievously at him. "You know, you should try and get Penny alone some night in that room over there," he suggested,

pointing to the main room, "you know, and try to get a little actionâ€¦"

Seaweed looked at him distastefully. "If it's all the same to you, I'd rather wait on that one."

Link huffed. "I wasn't talking about _that._ I agree with you on _that._ I was just thinking you could make out or something."

"With my _momma _in the next room? Try again, cracker boy."

Link looked a little unsettled. He still wasn't sure what that nickname meant. "Just saying, is all, man."

**A/N: Sorry, guys. This seems a little like a filler chapter, I know (and I have to warn you, the next chapter's gonna be a little fluffy), but it made sense to try and get the gang settled in before sending them off to see Dr. King. (And, yes, I'm actually going to include parts of his speech in the story.) **

7. Every Night is a Fantasy

A/N: To Ashbashtus98 (and all the rest of you who were secretly hoping for some Tracy/Link action: Merry Christmas. :) It's really short, but that's how I like my fluff chapters... short. Yeah. So... on with the story.

Chapter Seven:

Every Night is a Fantasy

TRACY'S POV

It was unbelievably late. _Or unbelievably early, depending on how you think about it, _Tracy's exhausted mind mused. She turned off the light and adjusted her nightgown before opening the bathroom doorâ€¦

And scaring herself half to death.

"Link!" she whisper-shouted after catching her breath. "Holy cow, Link, you _scared_ me!"

Link sprang up from where he was sprawled on the sofa. "Tracy! What are _you_ doing up?"

Tracy gestured abstractly toward the bathroom. "What are _you_ _doing_ up?"

Link smiled saucily and slipped his arms around her waist. He pulled her closer and whispered into her hair (it was a wonder he could actually reach). "I was thinking. About you. About us. Aboutâ€¦" He waved a hand towards the rooms where Seaweed and Penny were sleeping. "Them." He chuckled. "He's gone loopy. You know he actually dipped a handkerchief in her perfume and took it with him?"

Tracy giggled. "That's nothing. Penny stole one of his shirts! I saw her cuddling with it in her sleep." She sighed and put her head on his chest. "It's sweet, don't you think?"

He moved even closerâ€”there wasn't a fraction of an inch of space between them. "D'you think they're insane?"

"No! They're in love!" She pulled back from him and looked him in the eye. "What are you going to have of me when I'm gone?"

He raised his eyebrows. "Gone?"

"I want that degree in musicology, Link. You know that." She wrapped her arms around his shoulders. "What will you have to remember me by?"

He smirked. "We could make a memory right now, if you want." He kissed her firmly on the lips.

She smiled and kissed him back. He guided her slowly toward s the sofa and laid her down on it, crawling on top of her when she was settled. He kept kissing her, applying just the right amount of force. She parted her lips a little, getting the full taste of him.

She didn't want any more than this. After all, they had to save something for the next memoryâ€¦|

****SEAWEEED'S POV****

Seaweed lay awake, staring at the ceiling, holding the handkerchief in his right hand. He brought it to his face and inhaled deeply.

He loved Penny. He was sure of that much and more. He loved her more and deeper than he had ever loved anyone else. He wanted to be with her forever; but he couldn't tell her that. Not yet.

"We're seventeen!" he thought. "We have _dreams_, things we should probably get done _before _getting married!" He sighed and lay still for a minute, thinking. He sounded a little bitter, even to himself. He wasn't going to _leave _herâ€¦| he just wasn't going to _marry _her.

Yet.

He got up off the bed, opened the bedroom door, and headed across the main room to the bathroom. He didn't notice that Tracy and Link were on the sofa until he was halfway across the room.

He nearly jumped out of his skin. Yes, there they were, lying on the couch kissing and doing God-knows-what. They were so deeply into each other that he had walked right by them and they hadn't noticed.

Seaweed tiptoed back to the room and shut the door. _I can wait, _he thought. _Gosh, I didn't even hear him leave the roomâ€¦|_

* * *

>Penny rarely dreamed in colors or pictures anymore; she dreamed more in sounds and smells and feelings.

_For example, the slow _whooshâ€¦| whoosh _of someone breathing next

to her. Or the slow in-and-out movement of a peacefully sleeping chest moving up against hers. Or the feeling of arms around her waist, or the smell of coffeeâ€¦|_

Seaweed.

* * *

><p>TRACY'S POV

Tracy silently made her way into her bedroom. She could have sworn she'd heard a door open and shut, even though Link hadn't, and she'd thought it was best to stop for now and pick up where they left off later, perhaps in a more private setting.

She glanced at Penny, who was still clutching the shirt like a child's security blanket. She pulled it closer to her and murmured Seaweed's name in her sleep.

Tracy shook her head and smiled sleepily as she got back into her own bed. Love was a strange thing.

A/N: This is the LAST fluff chapter. I PROMISE. :)

8. A Dream in the Future

**Disclaimer: I do not own any part of Martin Luther King Junior's "I Have a Dream" speech. What direct quotes I got were from (And, to any history junkies who may be reading this, forgive me if I got some of my visualizations wrong. Please feel free to correct me in the form of a review. **

A/N: Sorry to keep this chappy waiting a little longerâ€¦| It was harder to get started on this one. I think it'll be worth it, though. :)

Chapter Eight:

A Dream in the Future

The next morning, Seaweed settled himself onto a short wall around a shrub near the Lincoln Memorial. He motioned to Penny, indicating that she should sit on his lap.

Penny looked around nervously at the surrounding people. Her experience with public displays of affectionâ€¦"particularly with Seaweedâ€¦"was that they were not generally well received.

Seaweed, once again, seemed to read her mind. "Penny," he said softly, "no one is going to try to stop us here. They're here to support integration, remember?"

Penny nodded and obligingly sat on his lap. Her arms autonomously went around his neck, and his arms looped around her waist. She kissed the top of his head (his hair looked like it wouldn't be softâ€¦"but it was), and he kissed her neck. He was gentle about it, but it still gave her the shivers.

"Why don't you ever let me sit in your lap like that?" Tracy teased

Link.

Link thought furiously for an answer that would not end in him getting in trouble and was thankfully saved by Ms. Maybelle.

"We got some good seats!" she remarked. They were as close as guest audiences could sitâ€"the press had already made camp on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, waiting for the wonderful Dr. King to arrive. There were camera crews and national radio stations mixed in with eager newspaper reporters, and every one was bouncing with anticipation.

Thousands of people waited patientlyâ€"if perhaps noisilyâ€"for Dr. King to appear on the Memorial. Penny fidgeted anxiously, and Seaweed rubbed her back to relax her. "He'll come out soon," he whispered.

They waited expectantly for a few more minutes, eyes trained on the podium at the top of the Lincoln Memorial. After a while, Penny saw a broad-shouldered, square-jawed black man make his way up the steps. He had a charismatic air about him, but he also seemed humble, as though he could make excellent conversation with anyone in the crowd before him, but wouldn't really intimidate any of them.

Ms. Maybelle gasped and sat up straighter. This must surely be Dr. King.

He got up to the podium and arranged his notecards. Then, he looked out at the audience and began to speak.

"I am happy to join with you today in what will go down in history as the greatest demonstration for freedom in the history of our nation.

Five score years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand today, signed the Emancipation Proclamation. This momentous decree came as a great beacon light of hope to millions of Negro slaves who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice. It came as a joyous daybreak to end the long night of their captivity.

But one hundred years later, the Negro is not freeâ€"|"

Penny closed her eyes, leaned against Seaweed, and let the words wash over her. He spoke fervidly about how Americansâ€"_all_ Americansâ€"had been promised a "check" of sorts entitling them to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; but black people had been handed a bad check. He asserted that America could not wait any longer to give its people of color what they were dueâ€"but quickly admonished that violence should never replace civil protest. He made it clear that civil rights protestors would not be satisfied until minorities were just as much a respected part of society as white people were.

All in all, it was the most moving, uplifting, spirited speech Penny had ever heard, and it only got better.

"I say to you today, my friends, so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.

I have a dream that one day, this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal.'

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering from the heat of injustice, sweltering from the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

I have a dream that one day, my four little children will be judged not by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.

I have a dream today.

I have a dream that one day, down in Alabama, with its vicious racists, with its governor having lips dripping with the words of interposition and nullification; one day right there in Alabama, little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers."

Penny leaned down and whispered in Seaweed's ear. "It sounds like paradise."

Seaweed shook his head. "No, it doesn't. It sounds like what _this _world should be like."

Penny nodded and concentrated on the last bit of the speech. "When we allow freedom to ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, 'Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!'"

This conclusion was met with thunderous applause, as well as more than a few passionate cries of "AMEN!" (Most of these came from Ms. Maybelle.)

For a moment, Penny felt sorry for the newspaper reporters. There was no way the emotion in that speech could be contained on a pageâ€¦|

A/N: Ready... set... REVIEW:) No, seriously, I'd like to take a moment to thank everyone who has reviewed nicely, read faithfully, and just been all around great. There are SO MANY of you (thank you to EVERYBODY), but the ones that stood out to me were: Penguinperson, sweets09, Ashbashtus89 (did I get it right this time:)), hairspraygirl, and (most recently) Blushing Juliet and Lizardz94. :) Thanks, y'all.

9. Never Leave Me Without Love

**A/N: Thanks so much to sweets09 and hairspraygirl for the ideas for

this chapter!**

Chapter Nine:

Never Leave Me Without Love

Ten months laterâ€|

Penny stood in her doorway, silently surveying the stacks of clothing on her bed. _Blousesâ€|skirtsâ€|underthingsâ€|_She bit her lip and rooted around under her pillow for the t-shirt.

_It's _college, she thought. _I'll be able to come back and see him every weekendâ€| just not every day, whenever I want himâ€| whenever I _miss _himâ€|_

She grabbed the shirt, folded up, and placed it at the bottom of a stack of blouses.

Nodding with an air of satisfaction, she headed out of her room and to the front door to appease her Seaweed cravingâ€| but didn't quite get there, as she was pummeled by a hug from behind.

"MY BABY'S GOING TO _COLLEGE_" her mother wailed, squeezing tighter.

"Mom," Penny huffed, "you've been doing this every time I go out all summer. I love you, but it's getting ridiculous."

Her mother sighed and reluctantly let go. "I know. But I guess your old mother is going to get lonely here after a while." She sighed again. "I almost miss your grandmother."

Penny patted her mother on the shoulder. "I'll come back to visit, I promise."

Mrs. Pingleton smiled sadly. "All right, go ahead."

Penny kissed her mother on the cheek and hurried out the door. She was having dinner at Seaweed's, and she really didn't want to be late.

* * *

>"SURPRISE!" <p>"Whatâ€|?" Penny was utterly confused. She had knocked on the door to Seaweed's house, found it open, and let herself inâ€| only to be greeted by Tracy, Inez, Ms. Maybelle, and Seaweed popping out from behind furniture surrounded by balloons.<p>

She was surprised, all right.

"What _is _this?"

Tracy frowned at her. "Penny, it's July twenty-first."

"But whatâ€|?" Penny gasped. "My birthday! I completely forgot!"

Inez laughed good-naturedly. "You forgot your own

birthday?"\

Penny smiled sheepishly. "I guess I did. I've been really busy lately with packing and stuff." Seaweed's face clouded over for a second, but he was grinning again within moments.

"C'mon, let's eat!" he exclaimed eagerly. "Momma made fried chicken, Penny; your favorite."

Seaweed fidgeted all the way through dinner, and by the time Penny started opening her presents, she was afraid he might actually explode. Thankfully, she only had two gifts to unwrap: one from Tracy and one from Ms. Maybelle and Inez.

She opened Tracy's present first: it was a framed picture of the two of them as tiny girls, in maybe the first grade. There was a card attached, and it said:

Best friends: Past, present, and future!

Love ya,

Tracy

"Aww, thanks, Tracy!" Penny said, leaning over to give her friend a hug. "I'll put this up in my dorm room!"

She proceeded to open the present from Ms. Maybelle and Inez. "Oh, my goodness!" she exclaimed, lifting the silver bracelet out of its box. "It's beautiful! Thank you so much!"

"Read the card!" Inez insisted.

Penny looked at the card inside the box and gasped. On the front of the card was a detailed pencil sketch of the Stubbs family, plus one. Ms. Maybelle had her arms around her two children and Penny, who was leaning her head on Seaweed's shoulder and holding Inez's hand. "Inez, this is amazing!"

"I had Momma and Seaweed sit for me, but it would've ruined the surprise if I asked _you _to pose, so I had to draw you from memory," Inez explained. "Read it."

Penny opened the card. Inside it read:

Thanks for being a great big sister. This should go great with your necklace!

Love,

Inez and Ms. Maybelle

Penny was puzzled. "What necklace?"

Seaweed's eyes widened. He jumped up and grabbed Penny's hand. "Uh, I think we should probably head back to your place now, Penny." A chorus of agreement went up among the rest of the party-throwers.

Penny frowned. "My curfew isn't for another hour."

Seaweed pulled her to her feet. "Still, we should go."

"Okayâ€| bye, everybody! This was wonderfulâ€| thank you!"

And they left.

* * *

>They were walking up her street when Seaweed suddenly stopped.
"Umâ€| do you want to open my present, Penny?" he asked,
almost shyly.

Penny smiled. "Seaweed, you didn't need to get me anything. Iâ€"

He cut her off. "Yes, I did." He guided her to a bench on the corner,
and they sat down. He handed her an oblong red box. "Open it," he
urged her.

Penny carefully lifted the lid off the box and unwrapped the tissue
paper inside, revealing a diamond ring on a silver
chain.

"_Seaweed_," she gasped, "thisâ€| this is _gorgeous_!"

"It was Momma's," he said simply. She started to put it on, but he
took it gently from her hands. "Allow me," he whispered. He undid the
clasp and, with more tenderness than Penny would have ever thought
possible, placed the chain around her neck. He sat back, and she
leaned up against him, inclining her head on his chest.

"It's beautiful, Seaweed," she murmured. "Thank youâ€| but why?"

He put his arm around her shoulders and squeezed. "It's called a
promise ring," he explained softly, "and I gave it to you for two
reasons. One," he held up his index finger, "it's me promising you
that someday, when we can even _think _about itâ€| I'll ask you to
marry me."

Penny's eyes widened. She smiled, gave him a kiss, and let him
continue.

He held up two fingers. "Two, it's you promising me that you won't
everâ€| forget me." He said this last part very softly, almost so
that Penny couldn't hear him. But she did.

"Seaweed, I won't forget you, ever. Don't act so sad. I'm just going
to University of Maryland. I can come back every weekend,
Thanksgiving, Christmas, spring breakâ€|"

"But that's still one hundred and fifty-four days that I can't see
you."

"You counted?"

"Hey, I'm not packingâ€|I've got time on my hands."

Penny sighed and put her hand on his shoulder. "Seaweed, you're
smart. You could go anywhere you wanted to for college."

"No, I couldn't," he said. They both knew it was true. They sat in silence for a few minutes.

"I love you," Penny said softly.

Seaweed looked at her, surprised but pleased, no, elated. Could it be that was the first time she had ever used that exact phrasing with him?

She didn't have much time to think about it. "I love you too," he whispered before leaning down and gently kissing her lips.

10. Time is Our Friend

****A/N:** This chapter wins the award for "Hardest Chapter to Come Up With a Title For". And, also, I really, really hope sweets09 is having an awesome time in Guatemala! ****i.Š**

****I know **_**I **_**really hate long A/Ns, so I'm going to keep this brief: I have never written about adults before. Never. If you see something in here that needs a little work, please review! If you think it was great and I shouldn't change anything, please review! Just let me know how I didâ€¦| thanks!****

Chapter Ten:

Time is Our Friend

Five years passed. Seaweedâ€"being who he wasâ€"and Linkâ€"having filled himself up so much in the looks and dancing skills departments that he was somewhat short on brainsâ€"did not go to college, requiring them to find something else to do with their time. Link was mercifully discovered by a record company in the first year, and did very well; he sold hundreds and hundreds of 45s inâ€¦| well, in record time.

Seaweed, however, was not so lucky. He had always known there was money in dancing, but it took him until the second year to figure out that there was even more money in teaching people how to dance. Even so, it took him until the fourth year to get himself a decent apartment.

Through all this, though, the two respective couples did not drift apart. In fact, in the middle of Tracy's senior year at MSU, she and Link decided they could not wait any longer and got married. Their marriage was unconventional from the start; Tracy insisted on graduating before moving in (or even honeymooning) with Link.

Seaweed and Penny were not married yet. They loved each other, each more than the other could know, but they couldn't tie each other down that way until they were more stable.

But even so, if it was possible, Penny and Seaweed fell more deeply in love than ever beforeâ€¦| until Seaweed finally decided it was time.

* * *

><p>SEAWEED'S POV

"Andâ€| break!" Seaweed grabbed a towel from his duffel bag and wrapped it around his neck. "Good job, everybody," he said to his students. "See you next weekâ€|don't practice, or you'll get used to your mistakes. That means you, Paul." The best dancer in his class grinned and gave him a thumbs-up before leaving with the rest.

Seaweed checked his watch: four-thirty. He had two hours before Penny would be at his apartment for dinner; that was more than enough time to swing by Tracy and Link's place. He needed to ask them something.

He went to the locker room after his students left and changed into some normal clothes, then headed out the door of _his _dancing school (he still had a hard time believing it) onto the streets of downtown Baltimore.

He considered briefly whether his comrades would be at their apartment. Tracy's job teaching music at PS 23 ended at two-thirty, and Link hadn't needed to go to the recording studio in months. Yes, they would be there.

He found their apartment building and took the elevator to the ninth floor. _Oh, God, how am I gonna tell them?_ he thought. _Is it even gonna come outta my mouth?_ He wiped his brow and brushed his clammy hands on his pants. _Gosh, if I'm like this _now_, what am I gonna do when I have to do it for real?_

The elevator stopped. He sauntered up to apartment #903 and rang the doorbell. Tracy answered it a few moments later.

"Seaweed!" she squealed. "Hi! How are you?"

"I'm fine, Tracy, just like yesterday." If nothing else, life as an elementary school teacher had made Tracy peppier than ever.

"Good," she beamed, completely unfazed. She called, "Link! Seaweed's here!" and led her guest into the living room.

Seaweed sat down in an armchair and leaned forward, leaning his chin in his hand and his elbow on his knee. Tracy sat on the sofa opposite, right next to Link, who was engrossed in some kind of televised sport. (Seaweed was not feeling observant enough at the moment to pick out which one it was, but he could at least tell from the screaming that it wasn't golf.)

"Soooooâ€|" Tracy said, prompting conversation.

"Uh, hey." Seaweed waved absently at Link, who grunted. "Listen, I've got something I wanted to talk to you guys aboutâ€|"

"Ooh, what is it?" Tracy asked, intrigued. Even Link managed to momentarily turn his attention to the very nervous-looking man sitting across from him.

"Ah, well, I don't know if I can say it out loud right nowâ€|"

"Oh, great! Then we can play twenty questions! I love that

game!"

"Right, Tracy." Link was obviously prepared to agree with anything his wife said as long as she didn't interrupt his football game (yes, yes, it was football; he was able to tell now).

"Okayâ€| first questionâ€|" Tracy thought for a minute. "Oh, I know: does it have anything to do with Penny?"

"Yesâ€|."

"Did you do something bad?" Link asked, eyes glued to the television.

"No! I mean, I don't _think _I didâ€|"

Tracy excitedly asked her next question. "Are you getting her something?"

"That has something to do with it."

"Is itâ€| a car?"

"Not quite in that price range, no."

"Jewelry?"

"Yes! Yes, that's a _big _part of it."

"Necklace? Bracelet? Ringâ€| OH MY GOODNESS, YOU'RE GOING TO PROPOSE!!!" Seaweed nodded, relieved that Tracy was still as perceptive as ever. She shook Link out of his sports reverie. "LINK, HE'S PROPOSING TO PENNY!"

Link smiled. "Congratulations!"

Weakly, Seaweed smiled back. "Thanks, butâ€| I need ideas."

Link turned back to his game. "It's been, what, six years? You know she's gonna say yes."

Tracy snorted. "Ignore him. He's lost a little of his romance recently." (Link started a little, obviously slightly insulted, but did not tear his attention from the game.) "_We_," she made a gesture that implied that she and Seaweed were in this together, "can think of something to make it a night she won't forget!"

Tracy thought for a second. Suddenly, her face lit up, and she leaned towards Seaweed eagerly. "I knowâ€| do you have time to drop by the grocery store?"

11. I'm the Sand, You're the Tide

Chapter Eleven:

I'm the Sand, You're the Tide

Tracy huffed as she dug through her purse for the key to her apartment. Teaching music to elementary schoolers was never easy, but

today had been more taxing than usual, mostly because of a rambunctious new arrival in her one-thirty class named Dennis. She tried to push work out of her mind, opened the door

and abruptly dropped her keys.

The lights were dimmed, and what little light was left was tinted a dark pink. There were two full glasses of red wine in the center of the kitchen table, with the bottle standing between them. Link was sitting at the table; he had obviously been waiting for her.

He stood up, holding both glasses, and offered one to her. She accepted. "Hello," he purred, smiling seductively.

"Hello." Tracy smiled, dropped her purse, and took a sip. She got a bit dizzy; the wine was delicious, but she'd never been one for alcohol, and neither had Link. It was probably just there for atmosphere. She put her glass down and started to embrace him, but he stopped her.

"Wait." He went over to the record player in the corner and put on a 45, and a vaguely familiar tune warbled out of the speaker. He sauntered back across the room, put his own glass of wine back on the table, and took Tracy into his arms.

She smiled. They swayed silently in time to the music for a moment; then, he leaned down and sang softly in her ear.

They say it's a man's world; well, that cannot

Be denied

But what good's a man's world without a woman

By his side?

And so I will wait until that moment you decide

Tracy sighed contentedly. "It's our_ song._"

Link took a quick break from singing to say, "I know. It took me _forever _to find the record." He held her tighter and picked the song up again:

That I'm the sea and you're the pearl

It takes two, baby

It takes two

A king ain't a king without

The power behind the throne

He lowered his hands, which made her giggle.

A prince is a pauper, babe

Without a chick to call his own

He squeezed, and she squealed.

So please, darlin', choose me

I don't wanna rule alone

Tell me

I'm your king

And you're my queen

And no one else can come between

It takes two, baby,

It takes two

Lancelot had Guinevereâ€|

He kissed her suddenly, powerfully, and she almost fainted. He lost track of the song and had to wait for a minute before singing again.

â€|_They say it takes two to tango_

Well, that tango's child's play

So take me to the dance floor

And we'll twist the night away

He dipped her with a flourish, and then brought her up again, so close that their noses touched.

So Frankie Avalon

Had his favorite Mouseketeer

I dream of a lover, babe

To say the things I long to hear

So come closer, baby, oh

And whisper in my ear

Tracy came in with her _Love! _as though no time at all had passed between when they'd sung this song for the first time in front of thousands of people, and now, when they were alone. They danced and sang to each other until the music stopped. They silently held each other for a moment, until Link broke the silence.

" 'Lost my romance,' eh, darlin'?"

"I think you just found it."

****A/N: Okay, guys, I know I promised I wouldn't write any more fluff chapters, but this was just too much to pass up. :) Next chapter will be a MAJOR plot mover, I promise.****

12. If You'll Be My Bride

Chapter Twelve:

If You'll Be My Bride

"Seaweed! Penny never had to ring the doorbell at Seaweed's apartment; she'd had her own key for a couple years now. "I'm here!" She wouldn't have even had to announce herself when she came over for these Friday night dinners if common courtesy (and her fear of accidentally catching Seaweed in his underwear) didn't demand it.

"Seaweed?" He didn't answer. She turned on a light and stared, puzzled, at the carpet. There was a red rose sitting at her feet. There was another one about a foot away, and anotherâ€¦ and anotherâ€¦ and anotherâ€¦

She followed the trail of flowers into Seaweed's kitchen. There were two unlit candles, two sets of silverware, and two crystal wineglasses on the kitchen table. Seaweed was taking a chicken out of the oven. Penny stood silently watching him without alerting him to her presence. Clueless, he stuck a thermometer in the chicken, read it with satisfaction, and plunked the bird on a platter. He was turning around to put the chicken on the table when he saw her.

"Oh, hi!" he said, almost dropping the platter on the table. "You're early."

"Only by a few minutes," Penny said, a little amused by his jumpiness.

"Right." Seaweed took off his oven mitts and put them on the counter, then stepped out of the kitchen and held his arms out to her. "How are you, my princess?"

Penny giggled. "I'm fine, and that sounds like the best idea I've heard all day." Seaweed looked confused, and then laughed as he realized that she was referring to his "Kiss the Cook" apron. She stepped forward into his arms and did just that, reaching her arms around his waist to untie the apron.

After a minute or two, he turned the kiss into a hug. "Have I got a dinner for you!" He gestured toward the chicken on the table. "Lemon chickenâ€¦it's French." He pulled the lid off a pot on the stove. "New potatoesâ€¦also French." He grabbed a basket off the counter and placed it in the center of the table. "French breadâ€¦and, believe it or not, that's French, too." He grinned and pulled out a bottle of red wine from a cabinet.

"Let me guess," Penny smiled. "That's French wine?"

"On my budget?" Seaweed joked. "Nah, this is from California."

Penny beamed. "Either way, it all looks delicious. You did all this for me?"

"Yes." Seaweed dimmed the lights and lit the candles on the table. He

pulled out Penny's chair for her before sitting down himself.

She watched him take a chicken leg and spoon out a serving of potatoes without taking any for herself. He looked up and noticed her staring at him. "What is it?"

"Nothing," she sighed. "It's just that you're amazing."

He smiled. "I love you, too." Suddenly, he got serious again. "Now eat. We've got somewhere we need to go after this."

"Where?"

"You'll see."

* * *

>"Seaweed, where are we going?"<p><p>

"You'll know when we get there." Penny and Seaweed were on the uptown bus, and Penny was getting agitated. Seaweed had still not told her where they were going, and while she was sure whatever he was doing was going to be sweet, a little information would have been nice.

"This is our stop," Seaweed announced. The bus lurched, and he stood up, offering his hand to Penny. She took it and stood, and together they went to the front of the bus.

When they got off the bus, Seaweed walked Penny down the street to a bench. It looked old: the paint was chipping, and small chunks of wood had fallen off of it. Seaweed sat her down on it, and then sat down himself, facing her.

"What is this?" Penny asked, confused.

"Don't you remember? This is our bench! It's where I gave you this, five years ago." He touched the promise ring on her necklace, then ran his finger absently along the line of her collarbone. Chills ran up and down her spine.

He touched her shoulder, tenderly kissed her cheek, and whispered something in her ear. "Close your eyes." She did, and felt him move away from her. "Open them." She did. Seaweed was down on the sidewalk, on one knee.

Tears sparked in her eyes. "Seaweed!"

He put his finger on her lips. "Shh! wait a minute." He slowly took his hand from her face to her knee. "Penny Lou Pingleton," he said, "I have never loved anyone the way I love you."

There's no doubt, Penny: we're different. And I'd like to say that our differences haven't affected us but they have. They have affected us in ways I never thought humanity could even think of.

But I never dreamed, Penny, that you would do what you have done for the past five years: stand by me. You stayed with me through

everything that anyone ever said about us or did to usâ€”the stares, the message on your house, almost getting _killed_, for gosh sakeâ€”because you loved me that much. And that is just too much to try to live without.

Penny Lou Pingleton, I do not _ever _want to live without you. I love you more than life itself.

Will you marry me?"

Out of his pocket came a tiny box covered with blue velvet. He opened it, and inside was a silver ring with a tiny diamond embedded in it.

By now, Penny was nearly bawling. "_Yes. _Yes yes YES! Oh, Seaweed, did you ever think I'd say no?"

Seaweed grinned. "Well, it's just sort of customary to ask _before _you start planning the wedding."

Penny threw her arms around his neck. "I love you."

He kissed her powerfully. "I love you too." He stood up and picked her up off the bench and into his arms, one hand holding her around the waist and the other under her legs. He started to carry her back to the bus stop, when she spoke again.

"Aren't you forgetting something?" She wiggled the fingers on her left hand at him.

"Oh, right." He beamed and put her down on the sidewalk. After getting back down on one knee, he pulled out the blue velvet box and put the ring on her finger.

13. Good Morning Baltimore

A/N: I am REALLY sorry to have kept this one waiting so long (and, I know, I've been apologizing for that a lot lately). Big, big thank-yous to everyone who has reviewed this story... especially ASGT and Kat Maximoff, who told me what Penny's real middle name was, and hairspraygirl, who alerted me to a brainless mistake in Take One of this chapter. :) On to the story!

Chapter Thirteen:

Good Morning Baltimore

Penny's eyes opened heavily as the sunlight filtering through the windows brightened. She yawned and stretched under her blanket, and then rolled over to try and get an extra few minutes of sleepâ€”only to fall off the sofa she had been sleeping on onto the floor.

_What theâ€”? _Then she remembered. After Seaweed had proposed (she had to look at her left ring finger to ensure that it wasn't a cruel dream), they had come back to his apartment and opted to curl up under a blanket on the couch and watch a movie. Penny vaguely remembered falling asleep on the sofa, but she also remembered Seaweed being next to herâ€”and he wasn't. Curious, she got up off the floor and went to his bedroom.

He was snoring away on the mattress with only a sheet covering him. Penny was touched to realize that he had given her his pillow and blanket.

She pulled the sheet back and lay down next to him for a moment. Then she put her arms around his neck, moved closer, and listened to him breathe for a few minutes before kissing him awake.

"Mmmm," he rumbled, easing his arms around her waist and kissing her back. "G'morning, my princess," he yawned.

"Good morning," she replied, actually meaning it. She laid there in his arms, drinking in the scent of him. _This is how I want to wake up for the rest of my life_ minus the couch, _she thought.

"We should probably get up now," Seaweed suggested reluctantly.

Penny snuggled closer. "Why?"

"Because, we're engaged. Don't you think our friends and family might want to know?"

"Can't they wait five minutes?"

He got up and gently lifted Penny out of the bed and over his shoulder. She squeaked in protest, but he didn't listen, and carried her into the living room, where he set her down in a chair by the phone.

"Isn't it too early to call anyone?" Penny asked.

Seaweed checked the clock. "Good lord, it's eight thirty."

Penny sighed. "Guess not." She paused. "So, do we want to call first?"

"I know who we probably _should _call first_"

Penny blanched. "Seaweed, no_ not _now_ _not _first_!"

"Now."

"Could we at least wait till after breakfast?"

"Penny_!" He gave her a look and pushed the phone towards her. "Now." His eyes softened. "Just get it over with."

She gave him a mildly nasty glare, took the phone, and dialed. It rang twice, and then someone picked up.

"Hello? This better not be a telemarketer_!"

"Hello, Mother."

"Oh, hello, Penny! How are you? How are Tracy and Link and Kelpie?"

Penny sighed. "Tracy, Link, and _Seaweed _are all great. Actually, that's why I calledâ€|"

"Oh, _no_, did he leave you? That's too bad, but there _is _a very nice young man your age who just moved in next door. His name isâ€"

"No, Mother, he didn't leave me, heâ€"

"Oh, God, are you pregnant?"

"NO, I AM _NOT _PREGNANT, MOTHER!"

"Then why did you call?"

"Seaweed asked me to MARRY him!"

"Oh." There was a pause. "And you saidâ€|"

"YES!"

"That's great, honey. When?"

Penny took a deep breath. "We don't know yet, Mother."

"Oh. Well, let me know when you figure something out."

"All right. Goodbye, Mother."

"Goodbye, Penny."

Penny hung up the phone and put her head in her hands. When she peeked through her fingers at Seaweed, she could tell that he was trying very hard not to laugh.

"She thought you were _pregnant_?"

"_Yes_. Happy?"

"Yes." He hugged her. "Now we can call Momma, if you want." She smiled and nodded. Ms. Maybelle would be much more pleasant to talk to than Mrs. Pingleton had been.

As Penny suspected, Ms. Maybelle and Inez (who was now a proud regular on the Corny Collins Show, in the family tradition) were thrilled to shreds about their engagement. Tracy was ecstatic, and asked if Penny needed any help planning the wedding. (She did.) Neither Penny nor Tracy were really sure what Link thought of the whole thing, but they were both fairly sure he was happy about it.

After everyone had been informed of the happy news, Penny decided, reluctantly, that it was time to leave. "My kids are waiting on me," she said apologetically as she kissed Seaweed on the cheek. Penny directed the chorus at a local high school. They were going to competition soon, and had voted to start practicing on weekends as well as in class. "I love you."

He kissed her tenderly. "I love you too. So much."

* * *

><p>TRACY'S POV

"Isn't this _great_, Link?" Tracy asked, bouncing up and down on her chair. "I _knew _that dinner would work, and Seaweed's idea about the bench was just ingenious!"

"Mm hm," Link assented through a mouthful of food. He swallowed. "By the way, darlin', these pancakes are great."

"Thanks. I don't know, this morning I just got up with the weirdest craving for maple syrup." She demonstrated this by drowning her pancakes in Log Cabin syrup. "And you really can't just drink maple syrup by itself, so I had to make pancakes."

"Either way, they're delicious." Link leaned over the table to kiss Tracy on the cheek. She giggled and started in on her pancakes. When she was about halfway through them, she got the strangest feeling in the pit of her stomachâ€| and had a sudden need to get to a bathroom, _now_. She stood up quickly, nearly knocking over the table in her haste.

"Tracy, what's wrong?" Link asked, concerned and a little scared.

Tracy pursed her lips, shook her head, and ran for the bathroom, where she got horribly sick. When she came back out again, she looked at Link and said, "Maybe I shouldâ€| call in sickâ€|"

Link nodded. "Right. And I'll call the doctor." He got up and helped her to the couch. "Are you up to make a trip to the hospital, or will we need a house call?"

"I'm fine," Tracy said weakly. "Probably just a little 24-hour bugâ€|"

"Still," Link said stubbornly, "you're sick. I'll call and make an appointment, okay, darlin'?"

Tracy sighed. "All right." She ran her fingers over her belly. A doctor could at least give her some confirmation about what it really was, even though she did have a sneaking suspicion that she wasâ€|

No, she thought, dismissing the thought before it even finished itself. _That can't be rightâ€|_She closed her eyes and tried to get some sleep.

A/N: smiles mysteriously What do _you _think?

14. Seasons with no Summer

Chapter Fourteen:

Seasons with no Summer

Tracy was sitting on the table in the examination room, with Link sitting beside her on a chair.

"You're gonna be just fine, darlin'," he murmured, bringing her hand to his lips. "It's probably just a little bug."

"Thank you," she whispered. _Although it will probably last longer than twenty-four hoursâ€|_she added silently.

Dr. Brown reentered without warning, causing Tracy and Link to jump. "I'm not licensed to prescribe anything for what _you _have," he said, "but I can refer you to someone who can." He handed her a slip of paper with an address on it. She read it and looked up at the doctor in astonishment.

"Oh my goodness." She could barely get her voice above a whisper.

Dr. Brown smiled. "I'd go see that doctor as soon as possible, tomorrow if you can."

Tracy nodded, struggling to keep herself from doing anything unprofessional (such as what she felt like doing: jumping up and down and screaming). "All right."

"You're free to go," the doctor said, waving at the door and scribbling notes in a file.

"Okay. Thank you!" She hopped down from the table and led Link out of the room, out of the office, and onto the streetâ€|

Where she promptly threw her arms around his neck, kissed him, and screamed joyfully in his ear.

Link nearly fell flat on his back from surprise (although the sudden impact may have had something to do with it, too). "What's going on?" he asked, confused.

Tracy took the slip of paper out of her pocket and gave it to Link. "Do you know what this is?"

He looked at it. "An address?" he guessed.

Tracy groaned inwardly. "Yes, but the address of _what_?"

He opened his mouth like he was going to answer, then shut it again. "I don't know," he admitted sheepishly.

Tracy huffed, took the paper back, and pointed a finger at it. "It's in the first line! 'Dr. Jane Eden, O.B.!' "

Link's mouth fell open. "You meanâ€| "

"Yes!" Tracy sang out. "_We're pregnant!_"

* * *

>Tracy lay awake a week later, considering the recent behavior of the man sleeping beside her. He had been helpful and gentleâ€| but distant. He was acting very strangelyâ€|once or twice she had actually caught him getting lost in thought, which was something she had _never _seen him do. He cooked and cleaned and

wouldn't let her lift a finger, which was something that most husbands would do after discovering their wives were pregnant, so that was a credit to him. But the few hugs and kisses he had given her over the past few days feltâ€¦ cold. Emotionless. Almost forced.

She turned over and looked at Link. He was mumbling in his sleep, but she couldn't hear what he was saying.

She sighed. He was probably still in shock. He'd be fine if she'd give him timeâ€¦

She glanced at the clock: one a.m. Six hours of sleep left till she needed to get up. She turned back over and drifted away into deep, dreamless slumberâ€¦

* * *

><p>PENNY'S POV

Penny awoke to the sound of the telephone ringing in the next room. She looked at the clock and groaned. _Four in the morning?! Who could _possibly _be calling this early?_

Reluctantly she got up and answered the phone. "H'lo?"

"Penny?" It was Tracy. "Oh, thank goodness you picked upâ€¦" Her breath sounded wet, and she was gasping between words. Her voice was frantic.

"Tracy? Tracy, are you okay?"

"Oh, Penny, I just can't believe itâ€¦"

"_What?_" Groggy as she was, Penny was really getting worried. "What is it?"

"He's _gone_!"

"Who's gone?" Penny knew the answer before Tracy even said it.

"Link! He just took offâ€¦ he left a noteâ€¦ he said he didn't know when he'd be backâ€¦ that he'd call meâ€¦ Oh, Penny, what if something happens to him? I don't know what I'll doâ€¦" Tracy sounded like she was about to start sobbing.

Penny suddenly remembered a conversation she'd had with Tracy when they were in junior high that sounded very similar to this one. It had been a different boy, and Tracy had been snubbed in the cafeteria at lunch instead of left alone in her apartment, but the crying and the frantic voice sounded much the same. In fact, the only thing that was really different between the past phone call and the present one was the seriousness of the conversation.

Suddenly she was fourteen again. "Tracy, stay at your apartment. I'll come get you."

Tracy sniffled. "Thank you." She paused. "And, Penny?"

"Yes?"

"I'm pregnant."

Penny nearly dropped the phone. This was more serious than she'd thought. "When did you find out?"

"A week ago. Link _has _been acting strange lately, but I never imagined he would just _leave._"

Penny's eyes narrowed. _What kind of husband would leave his pregnant wife alone_? She did not let any of her anger spread into her voice. "We can sort all this out when we get back to my apartment, okay? I'll be there in twenty minutesâ€"start packing."

* * *

>In forty minutes, Penny and Tracy had a basic plan. "All right, it's settled. You're staying with me until Link gets back." <p>Tracy could only nod. Penny put a hand on her shoulder comfortingly and continued.<p>

"Tomorrow you're going to call your school and get a substitute so you can take your time off."

"They're going to keep paying me, right?" Penny could see that Tracy really didn't want to be a burden to her, even though it wouldn't have been a problem.

"Yes," she said patiently. "And after that, I'll take you to your doctor's appointment."

"Okay." Tracy paused. "Penny, thank you so much. You didn't have to do thisâ€" "

"I know," Penny said quietly. "I wanted to. You're my best friend, Tracy. Did you really think I was going to leave you out in the cold?"

"No," Tracy admitted. "That's why I called you before my mother. That, and the fact that you probably aren't going to hire someone to hunt Link down or anything." She smiled weakly.

_No, _Penny thought angrily, _though I _did _briefly consider doing it myselfâ€" _ "You do need to tell her about it, okay? At least call and tell her you're pregnant after your appointment tomorrow."

Tracy bit her lip. "Wellâ€" okay." Suddenly her eyes widened. "Penny, what are _you _going to do? You certainly can't go on maternity leaveâ€" can you?" She stared at Penny suspiciously.

Penny laughed it off and looked at her hands. "No, I guess I can't. The chorus is doing very well, and the competition isn't for two months. Your doctor's appointments are probably going to be once every month for now, and they can do without me for nine days this yearâ€" I'm not exactly an indispensable teacher, which is why it'll be easy for me to get an O.K. from my boss." She looked up and noticed that Tracy was barely keeping her eyes open. "You need sleep."

Tracy shook her head. "No, I _need _to use a bathroom." She stood up and added, "Although sleep would be nice, too."

Penny smiled. "I knew it. I'll open the foldout couch while you're in the bathroom, okay?" Tracy nodded and made a beeline for the bathroom. Penny noticed that she left a piece of paper, folded up into a tiny square, on the couch. She glanced around, picked it up, and read:

Dear Tracy,

I don't know exactly how to tell you this, so I'm just going to come out and say it: I don't know if I'm ready to be a dad. I have to figure some things out firstâ€¦ I'm going on the road, and I don't know when I'll be back. I'll call you when I find a place to stay.

I love you. Never, ever forget that. I promise I'll come backâ€¦ I just don't know when.

Link

Penny shook her head, disgusted. _What a complete jerk, _she thought as she unfolded the hide-a-bed for Tracy.

A/N: All right, you guys were nice enough not to send any reviews with sharp edges after Penny's accident in Chapter Five. I can tell you right now that I don't have similar expectations for the reviews on this chapter. -shaky smile- Although, it would be nice if you'd count to ten before reviewing...

15. My Heart Has Grown

A/N: How's this for a quick update? (: I just sort of had to write all this down, so... here it is. As a side effect, however, this chapter was done on the fly... please alert me to any mistakes I made. Thanks!

Chapter Fifteen:

My Heart Has Grown, But it's Broken Too

"I just don't believe it!" Seaweed's tone was definitely less skeptical than angry.

"It's true," Penny said bitterly as she flipped a piece of French toast over in a pan. "He just _left_." She had called Seaweed a couple of hours ago and told him what had happened with Tracy. He had told one of the other dance teachers to cover for him and come over right away; he was currently sitting on the sofa, trying to keep his voice down so Tracy wouldn't hear him while she was in the shower.

"Where did he go?"

"We don't know."

"How long till he's back?"

"We, ah, don't knowâ€¦ But he's going to call her when he finds a place to stay for a little while." For Tracy's sake, she wasn't even going to _consider_ that Link might be gone for more than "a little while".

"And when will he find a place to stay?"

Penny winced. "We don't know that either." She flipped the French toast out of the pan and onto a plate with five more slices on it, put the plate on the table next to the bacon, and went to sit next to Seaweed on the couch. He put his arm around her, and she put her head on his shoulder, exhausted.

"Seaweed?"

"Mm-hm?"

"If we were married, and I wasâ€¦ how Tracy isâ€¦ you wouldn'tâ€¦ _leave _like this, would you?"

Seaweed pulled away and looked at her. "Penny, of course I wouldn't. I thought you trusted me enough to know that."

Penny guiltily hugged him. She hadn't meant to hurt him. "I do." She buried her face in his chest. "But Tracy trusted Link, too."

He embraced her in return. They both knew that, while neither of them were going to say anything, they were thinking of Penny's father, who had run off just like Link when she was eight: still young enough not have really understood what happened, but old enough to remember bits and pieces of him.

I want this baby to grow up with a father, she thought.

Just then, Tracy came out of the bathroom with her hair dripping. Penny and Seaweed apologetically sprang apart. _Seeing us togetherâ€¦ what must that do to her? _Penny thought.

Tracy showed no signs of grief. She immediately went to the breakfast table and poured half a bottle of maple syrup over two pieces of French toast.

Penny inwardly sighed with relief and discreetly motioned to Seaweed that they should join Tracy at the table.

They ate in silence for a few minutes. Inevitably, though, Tracy ran for the bathroom three-quarters of the way through her toast. Penny was sure that she was being sick, but wasn't quite sure what to do about it.

"Should we help her?" she asked Seaweed hesitantly.

"Yeahâ€¦you go hold her hair back, and I'll unfold the sofa bed. You got any saltine crackers?"

Penny stood there with her mouth open for a moment. "Um, if I have them, they're in the third cabinet to the left when you face the refrigerator." She started to go help Tracy, but paused. "How do you know all this?"

"My dad died before Inez was born," he said matter-of-factly while digging through the cabinet. "I helped Momma out a lot when she got sick like this. It'll go away in a couple hours."

"Okay." Penny kept walking towards the bathroom, but then stopped again. "Do you remember him at all?"

He sighed impatiently. "No, not really. _Go help her_."

"Right. Sorry." As she went into the bathroom to assist Tracy, she had to wonder if he, with no memories of his father, wasn't better off than her, with memories of a father who didn't want her.

* * *

><p>TRACY'S POV

Tracy lay on the sofa bed pretending to sleep while Penny and Seaweed worried about her in the kitchen. They didn't know that she could hear every anxious and angry word they saidâ€"not in anger at each other, but in anger atâ€|

_Link. _She forced herself to think his name, and it broke her heart.

She tried to think. _Did I do anything except get pregnant? _She snorted, which probably startled Penny and Seaweed. _He can't possibly think that that's not at least _partly _his doingâ€|_

Maybe he's not thinking about me at all.

She surprised herself with that thought, but inwardly admitted that it was probably true. _This is all about him._

Her eyes snapped open. _If none of this is about meâ€| then why am I moping?_

She sat up quickly in the bed and asked loudly to no one in particular, "What time is it?" Seaweed and Penny looked shocked. It struck Tracy that this was the first time she had spoken all day.

"It's, um, about eleven thirty," Penny stammered, obviously flabbergasted.

"Oh," Tracy said pleasantly. "Guess I'd better go get ready."

"Ready for what?" Penny asked.

"My appointment, silly! You know, at the O.B.? Did you forget?"

"No," Penny said, still looking a little thrown. "No, I remember. I'll get my coat."

"Good idea," Tracy chimed cheerfully, "it's getting nippy out." She went to get her own coat out of her suitcase. She was going to be strong and happy if it killed her. Who knew? Maybe eventually she'd get so used to faking happiness that it would somehow become

real.

_I can do this, _she thought. _I've got Penny, and Seaweed, and I'm going to be just fine. I don't needâ€| _She gulped and forced herself to think his name again. _Link. I don't. I can do this on my own._

* * *

>Tracy went to bed that night feeling particularly satisfied. She had gone to the doctor, and the baby was healthy; she had actually gotten to listen to its heartbeat, and that had made her feel indescribably joyful. Really. It hadn't just been an act. <p>Now, though, lying on the sofa bed and staring at the ceiling, things looked less hopeful. She reached under her pillow for the letter and read it again.<p>

_Why am I keeping this? _she asked herself as she read it for the fiftieth time. It certainly wasn't making her feel any betterâ€"not even the last note at the end.

Suddenly it occurred to her: _How can he love me if he doesn't love _all _of me? _She ran her fingers over her belly. _That includes this little guyâ€"or girlâ€"too, doesn't it? So if he doesn't love _him_â€"or _her_â€"thenâ€|_

_Then he doesn't love _me.

She cried herself to sleep.

16. Link, Hear the Bells

A/N: Wow! Three thousand hits already! I can't believe it... thanks so much, everybody. :) Especially those of you who have been kind enough to review.

Also, a HUGE thank you to theatrics, who dealt with my Internet illiteracy for long enough to help me find that awesomely amazingly adorable Hairspray icon that is currently on my profile. (This story was brought to you by the letter A.)

On to the chapter!

Chapter Sixteen:

Link, Hear the Bells

Two weeks came and went, with still no word from Link. Tracy could tell that Penny was worried about her, but she still continued to act like everything was all right. She ate, she slept, she took her pills, and (every morning in the middle of breakfast, like clockwork) she dealt with her morning sickness like a seasoned professional. Most of all, she tried to look happy; and, for the most part, she succeeded.

All of it fell apart on that Saturday morning.

Tracy was eating lunch (saltine crackers and peanut butterâ€"they were quickly becoming a staple food) with Penny when the phone rang. Penny got up to get it.

"Hello, Penny Pingleton speaking." Her face went white. She coldly said, "Yes. She's here," and held out the receiver to Tracy.

"It's for you."

Tracy didn't bother asking who it was. Slowly she got up and took the telephone from Penny.

"Hello," she mumbled.

"Hey, darlin'. I called the apartment, but you weren't there, so I guessed you were probably at Penny's."

"Yeah." Tracy felt like she had fallen asleep in a Frigidaire. "Where are you?"

"I'm at Danny's."

"Oh." Tracy had almost forgotten about Link's older brother—he hadn't really talked about him that much. "In Bethesda?"

"Mm-hm."

She took a deep breath. "That's not too far from here."

"No, it isn't."

"Does that mean you're coming home soon?"

He paused. "I—I don't know."

"Oh." Tracy's voice cracked. "You are coming home before the baby's born—are you?"

Another pause. "Maybe."

Tracy realized that tears were running down her cheeks. "Are you even coming home at all?"

"Yes," he said defensively.

"So when?" Tracy was trying very hard not to start sobbing, but it wasn't working out as well as she'd hoped.

"Soon. When I get a few things figured out."

"Couldn't we try and figure them out here? I could help you—"

"This is something I need to do on my own."

Suddenly she got mad. "Fine. You figure out what you need to figure out, and I'll tell this baby why its father didn't want it."

There was silence. "I love you," he said quietly.

"No, you don't." She hung up and tried to stop crying.

* * *

><p>PENNY'S POV

While she listened to Tracy's end of the phone conversation, Penny's mind dredged up memories from fourteen years beforeâ€|

She was sitting on the stairs in the house she'd grown up in, surreptitiously listening to her parents in the kitchen.

"_When are you coming back?" That was her mother, using the shrill, anxious voice that Penny would hear for years to come._

"_I don't know." That was her father. Penny was surprised she could remember his voice so clearly. "I've lost myself. I need to go find what I've lost."_

"_All right"â€"there was the shrill voice againâ€"you go find yourself, and I'll stay here and explain to our daughter why you don't love her anymore!"_

There was silence for a minute or two, and then Penny heard the front door open and squeak shut.

And he was gone.

Suddenly it was too much to bear. Penny ran out of the room and flopped down on her bed. She didn't cryâ€"she never did when she was really upsetâ€"but instead she shuddered and shivered uncontrollably, sobbing dryly and gasping for breath.

In a few minutes, she felt hands gently rubbing her back. "Deep breaths, Penny, deep breaths." Eventually she stopped shaking and was able to breathe normally.

"There, there, it's okay," Tracy clucked. "I'm sorry you had to listen to that... I know what it must have done to you." Of course Tracy knew all about Penny's father. In the sixteen years they had known each other, nothing had ever happened to one of them that the other wasn't told about.

Penny hugged her. "Thank you." Suddenly, she remembered why the call had been important in the first place. Embarrassed and feeling a little selfish, she pulled out of the hug and put a sympathetic hand on Tracy's shoulder. "How are _you_?"

Tracy smiled wanly. "I'll be fine." She perked up. "I had some ideas about the wedding."

Penny grinned back. "Great! What kind of ideas?"

Tracy stood up and led her to the kitchen. "Well, I was thinking basic pink for the bridesmaids' dresses, and white for you of course. Lilies would look gorgeous in your hair, or maybe pink roses to go with the bridesmaidsâ€| What do you think?"

"Sounds great." Penny really didn't feel like planning the wedding right now, and she could tell that Tracy wasn't exactly up to it either, but she would go along with it, because that was just the kind of thing best friends did.

* * *

><p>TRACY'S POV

Two months laterâ€|

"Are you sure you're going to be okay?" Penny asked her for the thirtieth time that day.

"I'll be fine!" Tracy laughed as she playfully nudged her friend's shoulder. "It's just for a weekend. I'll probably be so busy planning the wedding that I won't even have time to be spoiled by Mom." Penny's chorus competition was that weekend, and Tracy was going to visit her parents for a weekend. She had only told her parents about her pregnancy a week ago, and they were, of course, thrilled. Her father had wanted to talk to Link, but she quickly came up with a story about a weird craving for egg foo yung from China Buffet in D.C., and he settled for leaving a message.

The taxi driver stopped in front of Tracy's parents' house. Tracy paid him (with protests from Penny) and stepped out onto the sidewalk. She waved goodbye to Penny as she hurried up the steps to ring the doorbell.

The commotion started as soon as the door opened.

"TRACY!" Her mother pummeled her with a hug, and then stepped back to look at her. "Oh, Tracy, even if you hadn't called last week I would have known you were pregnant. You're glowingâ€| and you're starting to show!" She shouted back into the house. "WILBUR, SHE'S STARTING TO SHOW!" She turned back to Tracy and seemed to suddenly realize that her pregnant daughter was standing outside in the cold. "Come on in, dear, have some hot chocolate."

Tracy obligedâ€| but the moment she stepped into the kitchen a flash of light blinded her. When she could see again, she realized that her father was holding a Polaroid camera.

"Hey, honey!" he said cheerfully as he waved the photo around, trying to clear the picture. "How goes it at the Larkin household?"

"Fine." Tracy forced herself to be cheerful. "Such a shame he had to go on that promotional tourâ€| but now I get to visit with you!"

Her father grinned. "That's right. Hot chocolate, anyone?"

"Please," Tracy and her mother said in unison.

Tracy smiled. _The more things changeâ€|_

Suddenly, the doorbell rang. This time, Mrs. Turnblad looked genuinely confused.

"Who could that be?" she mused as she went to answer the door.

The door opened, and Tracy could hear her mother squealing again. It was probably one of her clientsâ€"her plus-sized clothing business was booming.

But the person that came into the kitchen looked nothing like a middle-aged size 20 woman.

Tracy froze. "Linkâ€|?" she murmured.

****DUN DUN DUN:)****

17. Darlin', You Had Best Believe Me

****A/N: Aw, come on, admit it, you knew he'd be back. ****

Chapter Seventeen:

Darlin', You Had Best Believe Me

Link smiled a little sheepishly. "Hey, darlin'."

"Linkâ€|" She could only say his name. Tears of joy and love and possibly angerâ€"no, _definitely _angerâ€"welled up from deep inside her.

"Mom, Dad?" she said quietly. "Could you give Link and me a moment alone, please?"

Edna reluctantly went upstairs with Wilbur. "It's just like a soap opera," she said. "Of course, women in Tracy's delicate state are always a little emotional about reunionsâ€|"

"But he's only been gone for, what, six hours?" Wilbur asked, confused.

Tracy ignored them and reached her arms out to Link as if to hug him. A relieved smile widened over his face and he spread his arms wide, stepping in to close the space between them. And, when he was close enoughâ€|

THWAP!

He pulled away, gingerly rubbing his face where she had slapped him. "I guess I deserved that."

"Darned right you did!" Tracy stage-whispered so her mother (who was doubtless listening at the air vent upstairs) wouldn't hear. "How could you just _leave _like that? Without saying goodbye, withoutâ€| without thinking of anyone but yourself!" Hot furious tears ran down her cheeks in rivers. "It was selfish and childish and cowardly and _stupid_â€"anything could have happened to you and I wouldn't have known about itâ€|" She stopped and turned away, too upset to even look at him anymore.

Suddenly, the thing that she most wanted and least expected to happen â€| actually happened.

Tracy felt arms around her waist and wet, ragged breath in her ear. "I'm sorry," Link whispered hoarsely. She suddenly realized that he was _crying._ "You're right."

He spun her around to face him. "It _was _selfish, and cowardly, and everything else you said it was. I wasn't thinking of youâ€| I was

barely thinking at all. Iâ€¦ I got scared. And I should've stayed here and told you about it instead of running away from home.

You were right about everythingâ€¦ almost," he continued.

He took her face in his hands and stroked it gently. "I _do _love youâ€¦ more than anything or anybody. And if I have _ever _made you think I felt otherwiseâ€¦ I don't deserve you."

Tracy could tell that Link was trying his best to hold back his tears, but one slipped out. It trickled down his cheek, subdued slightly by a thin layer of stubble. She delicately brushed it away.

"Justâ€¦ don't let it happen again."

"_Never_," he promised her fervidly.

She closed her eyes for a moment, took a deep breath, and opened them again. "Oh, God, I'm just so glad you're _home_!" And she kissed him.

The kiss was long and deep, filled with passion and joy and love, with a little bit of apology mixed in for good measure.

Suddenly, Tracy heard a throat clearing behind her. She reluctantly separated herself from Link until she was just holding his hand, and then turned around.

"Are we interrupting anything?" Tracy's father asked, grinning.

"No," Link answered cheerfully. "I'm just saying hello to my amazing wife." He pecked Tracy on the lips and, in an unexpected and touching show of affection, then crouched down to lightly kiss her belly.

Edna and Wilbur smiled knowingly at each other. "So," Tracy's mother boomed, "like I was saying before: who wants hot chocolate?"

"I'd love some," Link said, not taking his eyes off of Tracy for a second.

"Me too." _I'm such a pushover, _Tracy thought privately. _But he's home, and he loves me, and he loves the babyâ€¦ or at least he close to loves it. That's all I need._

"You sure you don't want a shot of maple syrup in yours, darlin'?" He put his arm around her shoulder and squeezed her playfully.

She smiled and leaned into him. "I'm sure." She looked up at his face. "I love you."

He kissed her nose. "I love you too."

* * *

><p>PENNY'S POV

"I just don't believe it." Penny was amazed by the spectacle before

her.

"I know," Seaweed murmured.

Penny had come back from the competition on Monday, 2nd place trophy in hand, to find the Turnblad residence empty â€| except for Tracy's parents, who told her that Link had taken Tracy back to their apartment. (They also mentioned something about egg foo yung, but Penny dismissed that as Mrs. Turnblad being hungry.) After calling Tracy to make sure everything was okay and resisting a very powerful urge to tell Link off over the phone, she had called Seaweed to get some much-needed alone-together time with him. He had surprised her by suggesting that they go somewhere other than one of their respective apartments, and somehow they had ended up on their backs in a clearing on the outskirts of Baltimore, looking up at the stars.

"I never imagined there could be so _many_," she whispered, afraid that she might break something if she spoke too loudly.

"Beautiful," Seaweed proclaimed softly. She looked over at him, and realized he wasn't looking at the sky, but at her. She blushed and was quiet for a moment.

"I don't know," she said after a while, "with Link back, and Tracy happy, and me and you together here in this gorgeous placeâ€| everything just feelsâ€| perfect."

He rolled over in the grass and drew her closer to him, so their foreheads touched.

"It does now."

The stars watched them silently as they kissed.

****A/N (again):** The next few chapters (just to let you know) are going to be a little bit like really long drabbles (if that isn't a complete oxymoron): they'll detail important events to come, but there won't be any real subplot or anything. :(Sorry. It's mostly because this story is yelling at me to end it, but I've gotta get a few things done first.**

****Speaking of whichâ€|** this next chapter is going to be fairly important, so I'm going to need to take a little longer on it than I have on the last few chapters. :)**

18. I'm Yours Forever

Chapter Eighteen:

I'm Yours Forever

Six months laterâ€|

****SEAWEED'S POV****

Seaweed fidgeted as he waited at the altar, smiling tightly at Link, his best man. _It's today, _he thought, blissful and jumpy at the same time. Link smiled back sympathetically, probably remembering his own pre-wedding jitters.

He fought to stay composed, but still flicked his eyes over the rows of people before him. Up in front were Penny's mother, his mother, and Inez's new boyfriend (Manny Something-or-other. Seaweed made a mental note to have a chat with him at the reception). Further back in the pews were Tracy's parents; Stooie, Duane, and Lorraine; a couple of Penny's teacher friends; and a few people from his dance class. It was a very small, intimate wedding, which was exactly what Penny had wanted.

Looking at the guests was beginning to make Seaweed nervous, so he glanced around the church. He had to admit it: Tracy had really outdone herself. There were red roses and baby's breath everywhere, lining the walls of the church she and Penny had gone to as kids. They were having the reception in the courtyardâ€”just a simple dinner-and-dancing kind of thing, with a local band providing the entertainment. And, after the reception, they would get into the limo and head for Cape Cod for the honeymoonâ€”he shivered with anticipation.

He stared at the door. _I wonder what Penny's doing right nowâ€”_

****PENNY'S POV****

Penny looked at herself in the mirror. _Tracy did a good job, _she appraised. She turned this way and that, examining herself in her dress. It was classic white, full length, with spaghetti straps and some kind of glittery fabric on the skirt. She fluffed her veil out a little and tried to adjust to the feeling of her elbow-length gloves in the April air.

She looked herself in the eye. _It's today._

Tracy bustled into the dressing room with a couple of pink roses. "All right, now for the finishing touch!" One by one she relieved the roses of their petals and sprinkled them on Penny's veil. She stood back and looked at the final result. "Hm."

"What?" Inwardly, Penny panicked. _What's wrong?_

Tracy must have realized the look of rising anxiety on her friend's face. "Nothing," she said quickly. "I've just never seen you with your hair down before. You've always had it up in pigtails or a ponytailâ€”it looks nice this way."

Penny smiled, relieved. "Thank you." She turned back around and looked herself in the mirror again, in her white dress and veil, and suddenly it hit her: _I'm getting _married. She smiled, joyful and jittery, and turned back to Tracy with tears in her eyes.

Tracy's eyes filled up a little, too. "You know I'd hug you if it wasn't going to mess up your dress, right?"

She clicked over to her friend in her high-heeled shoes and did it anyway.

Tracy hugged her back. "Don't be scared," she whispered.

"I'm not," she said assuringly. She stepped back and smiled. "Tracy,

you're _huge_, " she said appreciatively.

Tracy, who was now eight months pregnant, laughed. "Thanks, I think." Suddenly, strains of music floated into the room, and she straightened up. "That's our cue," she announced. "C'mon, Inez!" Penny's only other bridesmaid snapped to attention and followed the matron of honor out of the dressing room.

Penny closed her eyes, grabbed her bouquet, and took a deep breath. She waited five counts, and then slowly made her way to the open doors of the sanctuary.

****SEAWEED****

His breath caught. He had always known that Penny was beautiful, but she looked positively _ethereal_ coming down the aisle. Her hair was downâ€"this was the first time he had ever seen it like this, and he was astounded at how _much_ of it there was: golden waves waterfalled down to almost the middle of her back. Her dress caught the light coming in from the windows, sending it reflecting in all directions, and there were flower petals in her hairâ€"obviously another one of Tracy's ideas that had turned out positively perfect. She smiled shyly at him, and she imprinted herself in his memory as an angel.

My _angel_, _Seaweed_ thought suddenly. After today, she would be his, and he hers, _forever._

His face broke into a massive grin, and he took her hand as the preacher spoke: "Dearly beloved, we are gathered here in the sight of God, and in the presence of this company, to unite Penny Lou Pingleton and Seaweed Joseph Stubbs in holy matrimonyâ€|"

****A/N: -sigh- I love weddings...****

****I think that was pretty long for a drabble, but if you disagree feel free to review. :)****

19. Today All My Dreams Will Come True

Chapter Nineteen:

Today All My Dreams Will Come True

****TRACY'S POV****

Tracy sat up in bed and instinctively put a hand on her belly. She shook Link awake as she slowly realized what had woken her up. "Linkâ€| Linkâ€|" _Why am I whispering?_ she thought. "LINK!"

He jolted awake. "Tracy, I know you're pregnant," he groaned, "but you can get your own bowl of Grape Nuts at four in the morning."

"Link, the baby is coming. _Now!_"

His eyes bulged, and he sat up. "Butâ€| but it isn't due for two weeks!"

"Well, _I don't think it cares!_"

"No need to shout, darlin'."

"Sorry, honey. I'm not yelling at you, I just _really _need to get to a hospital." Her breath came in short puffs. A sudden wave of pain hit her. "Preferably soon!"

Link jumped out of bed and helped her up. "Okay, darlin', we'll get you to a hospital." Suddenly he stopped dead. "I'm gonna be a _father._"

"Yes," Tracy said through gritted teeth. "And do you know where the best place for you to become a father would be? THE HOSPITAL."

He turned around to look at her and suddenly remembered that she was in labor. "Sorry, darlin'." He grabbed her hand and they hurried out the door.

* * *

>"Agh!"<p><p>

"Okay, darlin', it's gonna be okay."

Tracy nodded and continued huffing and puffing. They had arrived safely at the hospital (Tracy was still thanking God for not making her give birth in the taxi), and she was lying in a bed in a room with hi-gloss white walls. Link was behind her, rubbing her shoulders and looking nervous.

Sarah, the midwife, came back in and smiled sympathetically at Tracy. "How you doing, hun?" she asked.

Tracy halfheartedly smiled back. "I've been better," she replied between puffs.

Sarah nodded. "I feel your pain." She stepped closer. "All right, time to check."

Tracy opened her legs and grimaced as another wave of pain washed over her. Link leaned down and whispered in her ear. "Shh, darlin', it'll all be okay soon, shhhâ€|"

The doctor finished examining her and looked up with a satisfied smile. "Ten centimeters. You, Tracy, are ready to birth this baby."

Tracy's eyes widened. "You can do it, darlin'," Link murmured.

She pursed her lips, nodded, and looked up at Sarah, who smiled. "Okay, let's do it."

The midwife beamed. "All right." She beckoned to the nurses, who immediately gathered around Tracy's bed.

"Okayâ€| PUSH!"

* * *

><p>LINK'S POV

"One more time, darlin', just one more push!" Link was amazed that he was still able to speak at all, much less motivate Tracy. Looking at all the blood on the sheets was making him feel a little lightheaded, and he was seriously considering faking a bout of "sympathy blood loss" so he could faint blamelessly.

"Ahh!" He looked at Tracy's face: red, blotchy, and sweaty from effort, and twisted a little in pain.

He rubbed her shoulders more deeply and kissed her cheek. No, he wouldn't abandon her nowâ€| or ever, for that matter. "C'mon, one more big push and it's all over."

She nodded and gave an obviously tremendous internal shove. The nurses cheered, and the midwife lifted a tiny, splotchy, wet thing up for its parents to see.

"It's a girl!" she announced.

Link suddenly realized he was crying. "You hear that, Trace? We have a daughter!"

Tracy, who was lying back on the pillows taking a breather, could only nod, smile, and cry a little, too. After a minute she held her arms out. "Let me see my baby."

Sarah chuckled. "One minute, hun, we still have to do some medical stuff. You want to know how much your baby weighs, right?" She didn't require an answer. She gently placed the baby on a scale and took a few notes. "Seven poundsâ€| that's a little larger than normal for a baby that comes this early, but still healthy."

Tracy smiled dryly. "Taking after her mother already."

Link kissed her cheek again. "You're _both _beautiful."

Sarah finished doing the "medical stuff" and handed the baby, wrapped in a pink blanket and a knit cap the size of a toddler's sock, to Tracy. Looking around at the happy family, she beamed and said, "I'll leave you three alone for a minute."

Link and Tracy ignored the midwife and stared in wonder at the little being looking up at them from her mother's arms. She waved her little fist and made a noise of contentment as she snuggled into Tracy's chest. Suddenly Link noticed something:

"Tracy, look. She has your eyes."

She smiled. "And your hair." She looked up at him, her face molded into a question mark. "What about a name?"

Link thought for a minute. "Umâ€|"

"I've got it!" Tracy exclaimed so forcefully the baby started.

"What?"

She smiled proudly. "Lianne."

Link was surprised, and a little confused. "It's a nice name, butâ€| why?"

"It sounds a little like Liam"â€|Link winced; he hated his middle nameâ€|"but feminized, sort of."

He smiled. Even if he wasn't a huge fan of Liam, Lianne was a good name for a girlâ€| _their _girl. "I like it."

20. You Can't Stop the Beat

****A/N: Happy 4th of July to all my fellow Americans. :)****

Chapter Twenty:

You Can't Stop the Beat

Two years later, Penny sat on an examination table in the obstetrician's office. Seaweed held her hand as the doctor studied the ultrasound pictures.

"Well," the doctor said, turning around, "would you like to know the sex of the babies? We can pretty much tell at this point, but some parents prefer to be surprised."

"We'd like to be surprised," Penny said cheerfully.

"We want to know," Seaweed said at the same time.

Husband and wife stared at each other stubbornly for a moment (this was obviously a longstanding squabble), and then Penny raised her eyebrows, turned to the doctor, and hoarsely whispered:

"Did you say _babies?_"

****PENNY'S POV****

June of 1978

"Girls! Lunchtime!" Penny placed a peanut butter sandwich each on two paper plates, poured two glasses of milk, and put it all on the table just as Jo barreled into the kitchen.

"Mmm, peanut butter!" The little girl grinned and sat down. "Thanks, Mommy!" Jo (short for Josephine) was the older twin by about two minutes, and the louder twin by about fifty decibels. At age six, she was already showing a preference for blue jeans over skirts, and for baseball over ballet.

Penny chuckled and shook her head as she watched her daughter wolf down her lunch. "Slow down, honey," she scolded gently. Jo nodded and kept chewing.

Just then, Alicia ran into the kitchen. Alicia was quieter and more feminine than her sister, always choosing pretty skirts over jeans and wearing her dark hair in braids, rather than a ponytail like Jo's. (Truthfully, their different hairstyles and clothing were a

quick way for Penny and Seaweed to tell them apart.)

Penny was surprised to see her running. Being the "quiet twin," Alicia was really more of a walker. "What is it, sweetie?"

Alicia stopped and took a deep breath. "Jo and I were playing in the attic and then you called us down for lunch and then she _left _me up there"â€"she stopped for a moment to scowl at her sister, who nonchalantly took a swallow of milkâ€"and then I found this!" She blushed, obviously not used to saying so much so fast, and shyly handed her mother a grainy old photograph.

Penny blew off the thin film of dust that had collected on the photo and laughed as she realized what her daughter had found. "Wow, I've been looking for this for years."

"Who are they?" Alicia asked, standing on tiptoes to look at the picture. Jo finished chugging down her milk and trotted over to have a look.

Penny adjusted the photo so both of the twins had a good view, and then pointed to a dark-skinned boy who was holding a blonde around the waist. "That's your daddy and me."

Alicia studied the picture appraisingly. "Can you do my hair like that sometime?" she asked, pointing to sixteen-year-old Penny's extreme pigtails.

Penny chuckled. "Sure."

"What about these two?" Jo asked, jabbing a finger at a boy with a pompadour who was kissing a plump girl on the cheek.

"Those are your Aunt Tracy and Uncle Link."

Both girls stared at her, pop-eyed and open-mouthed.

"That's Aunt Tracy?" Alicia whispered, shocked.

"Her hair is _huge!_" Jo shouted.

"Well, that was the style back then."

"How did she do it?" Alicia asked in amazement.

Penny smiled wryly. "Well, she used a comb, and a headband, and a _lot_ of hairspray..."

****YOU CAN'T STOP THE BEAT!****

****A/N: -tears up- I can't believe it's over... but it had to end eventually, right:(Thanks so much to EVERYBODY who reviewed this story and/or added it to their favorites or alerts! Y'all keep in touch, now, ya hear:)****

****Well, I guess this is it. I think I'm going to take a break for a couple weeks (mostly because I am headed to an area with NO WI-FI--can you believe it:)), and then start a new story, probably Wicked-related. As a final word...****

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**"Keep the faith, baby." :)**
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End  
file.
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